



"Cinéma-Vérité" in France

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PETER GRAHAM

Cinéma-Vérité in France

Three years ago, few people had heard of the term *cinéma-vérité*, and only those familiar with Dziga-Vertov's 1924 communist manifesto on the cinema knew what it meant. Since then, *cinéma-vérité* has become such a household word that its adherents have already been satirized (albeit rather insipidly) in Jacques Baratier's *Dragées au Poivre*, a film intended not for a select audience of initiates but for the general public. *Cinéma-vérité* has been hailed by some as a great new art form, branded by others as "still-borne" or "a lie." Few controversies have produced such violent verbal clashes. One of the reasons for this, of course, is that no one ever took the trouble to define what was meant by the term, which was thus taken to cover many divergent methods and ideologies.

As so often, the film critics are guilty of much of this confusion. Three years ago, the shrewd producer of Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un Eté* dug out Vertov's term and gave it a new lease on life in his skillfully launched publicity for the film. The journalists, avid for new catch-phrases, began to extend its meaning to include film-makers as different from Rouch as Drew and Leacock, Reichenbach, Marker, and even Flaherty—who was claimed at the 1962 Tours short-film festival as the father of the movement. The designation spread like wildfire: home movies, Italian neorealism, direct TV reportage and (in the opinion of Jean Douchet) even *Advise and Consent* were all *cinéma-vérité*. *Tot homines, tot sententiae*. Everyone felt comfortable in their judgments of the movement, for everyone had a different conception of it. And the filmmakers themselves, as was the case with the Angry Young Men and the Nouvelle Vague, had much less sense of brotherhood than outsiders liked to suppose.

They do have one quality in common: they all use reality as a *means* to their various ends. That is to say, they are anti-fictional, they dispense with a scenario, actors, and studio, and use film of *real* people, *actual* events. Although all such directors aim at the truth, this of course does not mean that the end is automatically any truer than a film using fictional or artificial means. It is, I think, far more difficult to avoid deliberate or accidental distortion when one is using nonfictional material. The persuasive power of the cinema is such that any tendency, conscious or otherwise, to distort or deceive can easily pass unnoticed. It is in their attitude to their material that such film-makers stand or fall.

Take Jean Rouch and Mario Ruspoli, the two directors most commonly associated with *cinéma-vérité* in France. Rouch made several excellent films in Africa as an ethnographer. He became increasingly interested in the cinema as a medium, and subsequently, using his light and efficient equipment as an ornithologist uses binoculars, he focused in *Chronique d'un Eté* on the typical Parisian. "What is happiness?" he and his collaborator Edgar Morin asked, hoping that the bluntness of the question would provoke their subjects to reveal their inner preoccupations, their anxieties and their passions in the twitch of an eyelid, the fidgeting of a hand. Rouch at first wanted to efface his role as a director and allow the ineluctable power of the camera to do its work. Objectivity was his sole aim. But this resulted in a tentative approach and a hesitant film. Worshipping the objectivity of the camera as recording instrument in his interviews, he forfeits the chance and the responsibility to impose on the material a view of life which is his own. Thus none of Rouch's films reaches a higher level than that of interesting experimen-

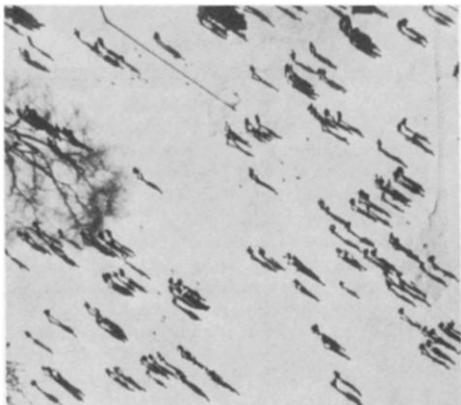
CINEMA-VÉRITÉ

tation, as does Chris Marker in *Le Joli Mai*, for instance, which combines interview and personal evocation in a novel way.

Ruspoli too, in his film about a lunatic asylum, *Regards sur la Folie*, was trying to be objective. He wanted to confront the spectator, in the starkest manner possible, with madness. In his interviews with the inmates he allowed nothing to taint the purity of the question-answer procedure. He refused to distort the purely visual presence of a madman with a commentary which would necessarily have given it a particular slant.

How is it, then, that neither Rouch nor Ruspoli succeeds in being "objective"? Evidently because they have failed to understand either the purpose or the innate qualities of the cinema. If film is an art, its purpose is not merely to record, but to select, organize, and alchemize what is recorded.* Watching the material that Rouch and Ruspoli collected, in spite of its undeniable interest, is like being allowed to see only the palette of a painter who is producing a masterpiece; it has all the elements that could go to make a work of art, but is never more than a tantalizing suggestion of what one might have seen.

But *Regards sur la Folie* and *Chronique d'un Été* are more than harmless might-have-beens. For in their quest for objectivity, Rouch and Ruspoli overlooked one of the paradoxes of the cinema, which applies as much to fictional as to documentary films. Although the camera can be absolutely true to an event in its external manifestation (actions, words, gestures) it can never, alone, be true to the meaning of that event, which is always dependent upon the selection and arrangement of the context. This was crudely proved by Kuleshov's now rather tiresomely renowned experiment with the same actor's face in three different con-



Marker's *LE JOLI MAI*.

texts, leading viewers to attribute three different expressions to it. But it applies minutely and subtly to every film. In *Regards sur la Folie*, Ruspoli leaves us deliberately at sea. The viewer's reactions to insanity vary according to his prejudices or his indifference, for no context is provided. The psychiatrist who revolutionized the methods of the hospital where the film was shot felt that the document would be a true picture of life in a mental institution only if projected to psychiatrists, who could fill in the gaps and draw their own expert conclusions. This is a damning judgment on a film aimed at a larger audience. In fact, through his deliberate detachment and refusal to communicate with his subjects, Ruspoli has (unintentionally I am sure) shorn the film of sympathy and warmth, generating in the mind of the lay spectator a reactionary attitude to mental illness.

Ruspoli's film does not fail because he did not organize or select; the fact that he picked certain camera set-ups, certain rhythms, in the editing, means that he must have made a choice. It fails because he attempted to make no choice, which is attempting the impossible.

*Jean-Luc Godard argues in his sharp and (I think) largely incorrect attack on Leacock in the *Cahiers "American Cinema"* number (150-151): "Leacock and his team do not take account (and the cinema is nothing but the taking of account) that their eye in the act of looking through the viewer is at once more and less than the registering apparatus which serves the eye . . . Deprived of consciousness, thus, Leacock's camera, despite its honesty, loses the two fundamental qualities of a camera: intelligence and sensibility. . . . His lack of subjectivity, in the last analysis, leads Leacock to lack objectivity."

The same is true of *Chronique d'un Eté*. When one realizes that the total material shot amounted to 25 hours before cutting and 1½ hours after cutting, one sees the enormous process of selection involved. Thus Rouch must admit that the presentation of the characters in the film must have been conditioned by his own view of them. He retained what he thought was interesting or revealing, but still seeks to pass it off as a somehow totally objective portrayal.

Indeed, behind Rouch's scientific facade there lurks the frustrated dramaturge. In the scene in *Chronique* where Marceline and Jean-Pierre talk together on the jetty at St. Tropez, Rouch actually had them prepare what they were going to say and rehearse it before he set the camera going. And in his latest film, *Liberté*, he gave some friends of his (non-actors) one or two themes on which to meditate (liberty, love, etc.), and then filmed them in the throes—the word is chosen on purpose—of improvising dialogue. In his own words, he was aiming at a kind of cinematographic *commedia dell'arte*. What he achieved was an uneasy hybrid. The characteristics of the live documentary or television report (wobbly camera, bad sound, hesitancy) rub shoulders with the accoutrements of the traditional fictional film (J. C. Bach and quotations from Sade on the soundtrack). The most interesting aspect of the film lies on a multiconscious level. One is aware from time to time that the "actors'" inspiration is drying up. Their embarrassment breaks the tenor of the film, but is

psychologically interesting. Rouch tells us that the man in the film with a shaven head was extremely nervous in front of the camera. Curiously enough, he is the only individual who imposes himself as a presence, instead of being a half-baked character. This unpredictable transition from life to film makes a mockery of Rouch's intentions.

There has been much discussion about the camera's relationship with its subjects in *Chronique*. Rouch showed the filmed material to the subjects months later, and filmed them again as they discussed their reactions to seeing themselves. Sometimes their behavior before the camera changed. Marilou wept, not in a normal healthy way, but self-indulgently, as a means of exhibitionistic catharsis. Sometimes the course of their lives was changed. Angelo had difficult problems, both personal and connected with his job (he was fired). This participation of the cinema in life has had great claims made for it. But this type of procedure creates exceptional circumstances; it is not every day that one has the opportunity of coming so nakedly face to face with oneself. I feel that the experience is not universal enough to be of real interest to anyone but a trained psychologist. And in the case of Angelo, where the camera changed the course of his life, questions of moral responsibility must be raised; Big Brother is not so far away.

Responsibility, moral or otherwise, is what Rouch and Ruspoli shirk by their approach. They have not the courage of their convictions. They cannot accept the inevitable: that the film-maker cannot be objective and must mould reality according to his personal beliefs. Two other French directors, François Reichenbach and Jean Herman, whose latest films are sometimes dubbed *cinéma-vérité*, are not afraid to impose their own views. Both have the right approach. But unfortunately their films, though full of interest, are marred by what one might call a lack of honesty or respect toward their subjects.

In *Un Coeur Gros Comme Ça*, Reichenbach gives a picture of a young Negro, Abdoulaye



Rouch's CHRONIQUE D'UN ÉTÉ.

Faye, who comes to Paris to study and to box. We see his encounter with Parisian life, his disappointment in the ring; we hear his letters back home. Much of the time, Faye did not realize or particularly care that the camera was filming him, and hence a large part of the film, thanks to Reichenbach's perceptive eye, captures Faye's innocence and charm. Unfortunately Reichenbach oversteps the mark. In one sequence he yields to the temptation of giving one of Faye's favorite songs about Paris a poetical visual setting. This evocation of Paris, however, has nothing to do with Faye; it is an insertion of Reichenbach's own imagination. On its own terms it would be perfectly valid, but it only irritates here.

In *Le Chemin de la Mauvaise Route*, Jean Herman focuses on two juvenile delinquents, Jean-Claude and Colette. He questions them on prison, love, death, happiness, etc. He obtains a great frankness, and the interviews not only record the callous cynicism of their attitudes but also suggest, very strongly, their vulnerability. Herman wanted also to show the kind of world in which they live, so he interpolated shots of pop singers, leatherjackets, motorcyclists, and the like. It is a pity that Herman has a cinematic tic; his whirlwind editing rarely allows a shot to last more than a second or two, and the long-term effect leaves one breathless. With this comes the awareness that, like Reichenbach, Herman imposes his own vision too harshly and indiscriminately—whole sequences of *Le Chemin* are virtually indistinguishable from his earlier frenetic shorts, *Actua-Tilt* and *Twist Parade*. And by the end of the film any sympathy for the young people is, for me, effectively smothered, for Herman makes them as puppet-like as the pop singers they adulate. In one long sequence at the end, Colette opens her heart; her lacquer-hard surface dissolves, and she is revealed as an ordinary, rather sentimental girl. She even weeps. But Herman chops up this confession and reshuffles the pieces; in a glut of jump-cuts, he shows her one moment with tears in her eyes, the next without; her laughter, her

seriousness, her swearing pass in such rapid succession that she jerks like a marionette on strings.

The question of the film-maker's respect for his material arises very crucially in the case of compilation films. By these I mean (in Marcel Martin's definition) films "resulting from a combination of documents which had a separate existence beforehand and were not filmed with this use in view." In other words, films like *Mein Kampf* and *The Life of Adolf Hitler*. Owing to the immense shortage of material, historical events are difficult to reconstruct satisfactorily. The temptation is always, in the case of a famous battle for instance, to use any striking pieces of newsreel which are not inconsistent with shots of the battle in question. And if fact, even the best compilation films, such as Aurel's 14-18 and the Thorndykes' *The German Story*, occasionally have to resort to this. If this kind of film were kept strictly within the limits of its definition, it would be silent; for the sound nearly always has to be added afterwards from other sources. When we are fortunate enough to fall upon a document as self-sufficient as the film taken by the Nazis of the Warsaw Ghetto, silence tells. This extraordinarily pathetic record, shot on 16mm, was due to be edited into a propaganda film to extol the efficiency of the Germans' solution of the "Jewish problem." The images brought back by the cameramen were so unflattering that the Germans abandoned the idea. When the spectator is aware of the film's history, the searing silence generates its own

Reichenbach's UN COEUR GROS COMME ÇA.



terrible irony. Similar at first sight in its pathos is a shot in Rossif's account of the Spanish Civil War, *Mourir à Madrid*, of a small, shivering child perched on a heap of rubble. What a quirk of fortune, one thinks, that a cameraman happened to catch so poignant an image. But then comes the realization that the shot is too consciously well composed, that the grain of the film is too fine to have been taken before the war by a newsreel cameraman. In fact this shot, like many others in the film, was taken by Rossif himself. No doubt the child is Spanish, and perhaps Franco is the cause of its shivering; but such a tacit insertion of specially filmed material into a context of newsreel shots is dishonest. Dishonest because it deceives, whereas Resnais, in his masterly juxtaposition of past and present in *Night and Fog*, threw his own work into relief by shooting it in color.

The two essential qualities of the good *cinéma-vérité* or compilation film, artistic honesty and the courage of one's convictions, are to be found in the work of two American teams, Robert Drew and Richard Leacock, and the brothers David and Albert Maysles, and a Frenchman, Chris Marker.

The Americans have made considerable technical advances: handy silent cameras; quick, precise exposure settings; fast film; portable recorders synchronized electronically with the camera. With this equipment they can approximate quite closely the flexibility of the human senses. This opens up whole new fields of experience; they can follow their subjects almost anywhere, and because of their unobtrusiveness (they need no artificial lighting) people soon forget the presence of the camera and attain surprising naturalness.

In *Showman*, the Maysles investigate that phenomenon Joe Levine, the American film producer. They show his life from day to day: his work at his office, his reunion with old friends, his public and private life. Like Leacock, the Maysles say they aim at objectivity. And in the sense that they did not tamper with events they might loosely be called objective. But through their selection of incident and their editing they transformed their material

into an artistic unity. This results not simply in a destructive attack on Levine (though he is open enough to criticism) but in true satire. As in Juvenal or Nathaniel West, its savagery does not induce one to recoil in disgust; it asks one to understand. One of the reasons for this lies, I think, in yet another curious paradox. The camera, by focussing on a particular rectangle of reality, heightens it—thus producing a kind of distancing effect between the image and the spectator. This is why ordinary people seem more ridiculous on the screen than they would in real life. For instance, in John Schlesinger's film *Terminus* there is a sequence where people apply to a lost-luggage office. The reaction of an audience to their timid inquiries is helpless laughter. No doubt the scene, witnessed by someone on the spot, would have been droll, but it would hardly have seemed hilarious as it did on the screen.

In *Showman* there is a scene where Levine reminisces about his childhood. He uses sentimental language and becomes emotionally quite carried away. In a fictional film, such a scene would be intolerably maudlin. But because it is real, it takes on a secondary meaning. It shows Levine to be an average, rather sentimental, and not particularly intelligent man: the ruthless film mogul is reduced to human proportions. Even in the most satirical sequences (when he is giving orders over the telephone, or talking to Sophia Loren, who dwarfs him) he never becomes merely an image of capitalism. He is at once a symbol and a man.

Drew and Leacock, in their less successful films, do not show as much restraint and sensibility. There is an almost Rouchian overtone of the romanesque in *Susan Starr and Jane*. The former is an account of a concert pianist's ordeal at an international competition. She fails to win the prize, and in an attempt to give the film a happy ending, the film-makers over-emphasize her friendship (is it really love?) with another pianist. In *Jane*, we see Jane Fonda's first appearance in a Broadway play: the rehearsals, the tension, her emotional difficulties, and cruelly, the complete flop of the

play. Throughout, one has the impression that Jane is *acting* rather than being. And, as in *Susan Starr*, emotional attachments seem curiously forced. But there is one moment in the film when the mask falls and we see the true, vulnerable, young actress—when the camera fixes relentlessly on her face as she reads out the notices which damn both the play and her performance.

The Drew-Leacock approach is better suited to events over which they have little control—as in *Primary* (electioneering), *Football*, or *The Chair*. Here, especially in the first two, the film-makers limit their role to presenting facts as they see them. But they never allow themselves to become mere neutral recording agents who press buttons. Drew has said that he may not know for sure what will happen, but he will have a pretty good idea of what he is after. Thus, in *Football* for instance, by lightning zooms into a contorted face, or hands clasped in prayer, the film-makers pinpoint the particular aspect of the subject they wish to emphasize.

The French critic André Bazin once wrote that he found the few, undramatic images of the early stages of Scott's antarctic expedition, actually shot by one of the expedition members, more compelling than all the suspense and excitement of the feature *Scott of the Antarctic*. They provided, he said, a more direct link with the experience itself. The same is true of *The Chair* when compared with *I Want to Live*. We are brought as close as we can ever come to the hideous apparatus of capital punishment. The long tracking shot down labyrinthine corridors to the death chamber, where the electric chair waits like some shiny black insect, has few parallels in the history of the cinema.* Nearly the whole film was shot before Crump was pardoned, at a time when no one knew whether he would be allowed to live or not. We see the drawn face of the prison warden, Crump's friend but potential executioner—it was he who would have to pull the switch. We *relive* an experience. The moral impact is enormous.

Drew is basically a journalist. His aim is to lay bare the facts and make a rational indictment. This is also the aim of the anonymously made *Octobre à Paris*, an account of the bloody clashes between Algerians and the Paris police in October, 1961. Although I have read the script, I have not yet been able to see the film (it is seized by the police whenever they get wind of a clandestine showing), but by all accounts it is a courageous document.

Chris Marker's more personal approach is different from that of Drew-Leacock or the Maysles. In films such as *Cuba Si!* and *Le Joli Mai*, he examines his own conscience in a poetical rather than analytical way. This kind of method is full of hazards, as the films of Herman and Reichenbach show by their faults. But Marker's sensibility and control are such that he never once puts a foot wrong. In *Le Joli Mai* (1962), he treats the same subject (Parisians) and uses the same technique (flexible equipment, interviews, etc.) as Rouch in *Chronique*. But here the result is a work of art. Straight conversations with all kinds of Parisians (shopgirls, an Algerian, an OAS sympathizer, a worker priest, engineers and so on) are combined with more lyrical linking passages where Marker evokes his own vision of the city. For him, the expressive resources of the cinema are not anathema. Shots and sequences are not strung sloppily one after another in misguided imitation of reality, but form part of an organic whole: each section contains groups of interviews which are relevant to each other, and the first part shows us the romantic visionary aspect of aspiring Parisians, the second goes on to more political questions. The music also plays an important and subtle part. For example, Marker discreetly adds some faintly nostalgic music to part of an interview (with a soldier and his fiancée) and this combination of the actual scene and the musical comment produces, through the depth of the associations it evokes, a true poetic image. Whereas with Rouch the commentary is virtually abjured, with Marker it constitutes the binding element; subdued but

full of sinew, it guides the spectator persuasively through the film and up to its moving conclusion. Like his earlier film on Castro's Cuba, *Le Joli Mai* is the lucid yet passionate essay of a man who believes in and cares about his fellow men.

The films of Marker, the Maysles, and Drew

and Leacock justify themselves by what they are. They have no need of a catchy label to bolster up their intentions. These film-makers present not *the truth*, but *their truth*. The term *cinéma-vérité*, by postulating some absolute truth, is only a monumental red herring. The sooner it is buried and forgotten, the better.

HENRY BREITROSE

On the Search for the Real Nitty-Gritty: Problems & Possibilities in *Cinéma-Vérité*

Ask a nonacademic about the *allgemeine Wahrheit* or the *Ding an sich* and he will probably look at you as if you are quite out of your head. Ask about the "real nitty-gritty" and he'll dig. He may not answer, but dig he must. He'll know that what you are asking is *what is really going on*, what is the basis, what is the truth, what is the essence of things. In the nitty-gritty world, truth and meaning turn up, more often than not, without benefit of an ideological matrix. The questions "what, why, and how" are admissible, but the answers are to be found only in the object or event itself. The trick is to be able to see them.

Cinéma-vérité, in its various manifestations, seems to be an attempt to get at the nitty-gritty of the world by observing people in the process of some crucial interactions with each other. The truth about them, the answer to "what is life really like?" is thought to be there, somewhere, and the way to tease it out is through the use of battery-powered sync camera linked to a portable sync recorder. One looks at the world through an Eclair Coutant or a modified Auricon, and listens to it through a Nagra or Perfectone recorder—and its un-

iqueness is, somehow, bound to be revealed. And sometimes it is.

Iris Barry's statement that "film is a way of seeing more than meets the eye" has been preached to an infinite number of film students, and bromidic as it may be at this time, it still suggests in a precise way that filmmaking is more than bearing witness. Through the manipulation of images something transcending witnessing may come about. One may argue that with editing the "truth" is distorted by the selective processes involved. The fallacy that the camera "never lies" comes easiest to those who know least about camera work. Any tyro cameraman knows which lenses to use to get the right "effect," to adjust the visible age of an actress, to pick a man out of the crowd, to get a favorable portrait. Camera angle and placement also select, emphasize, modify and distort, as do any number of other tricks of the camera profession. To argue that editing distorts the "truth" any more than camera work does would seem to be a silly argument. The reasons why *Operation Abolition* was untruthful about an event have much more to do with the intent of its producers than with the fact